

Angela Abdou, College of the Rockies

Q. Could you give us an introduction and some background about your project?

A. My name is Angie Abdou, and I have a PhD in English literature, and I teach English literature composition and creative writing. My publications tend to focus on support literature and then more of the creative writing, so I have three books, a short story collection and two novels. So I've been designing creative writing courses and I find that creative writing courses work better than other kinds of courses online, because the students are motivated. There's no reason to take creative writing unless you really want to, so the students are there because they want to learn, not because they have to be or not because it's a requirement or not because they think it's an easy way around a requirement. They're very motivated, and they tend to be good readers and writers, so they have the skills to excel in the online environment. So when it comes to develop online courses, I prefer to focus on creative writing ones. And this course I developed was a creative nonfiction course, and the idea for the particular BCcampus project was to do mobile education, so to have students be able to do the whole thing on their iPhone or iPad, and to access resources. There are so many resources now available that way. Particularly a lot of our country's writers are on Twitter, and there's a lot of organizations that are publishing good quality posts and good quality up-to-date information and exchanges and debates exploring ideas daily on those things. So I wanted to do the creative writing course, but tap into those resources that were available on Twitter, on different Facebooks or blogs or creative writing organization sites, so kind of have the students do their regular writing projects, but also tap into that online community and use that as part of the learning resources.

Q. What was the mobile component and how was that brought in?

A. Originally, BCcampus wanted us to do it on Wordpress, and they were going to- the guy who was helping coordinate the technological stuff was going to develop some specific software for us to use. The problem is, I was more familiar with Moodle, and my students were more familiar with Moodle, so we started on Wordpress kind of to fit with that request from BCcampus, but Moodle just worked better for almost everything that we wanted to do, and you can access Moodle on iPhone and iPad and all the resources, all the mobile technology, so we ended up moving back to Moodle, cause the students preferred it. And then the tech guy had developed a sort of Twitter-like device, but it just didn't work nearly as well as Twitter that already exists. So we ended up switching to Twitter. So in the end we used Moodle and Twitter, and I posted links to blogs, and to different creative writing organizations, and the students did their own blog. They did the blog on Wordpress. That was the only thing they did on Wordpress, and we just linked it to the Moodle. And the students were not as keen as I thought they would be to do it on a mobile device, and so once we got into the course a little ways, I just realized that the emphasis needed to be on the content. They were there to learn creative writing, and that had to be primary, and the mode of delivery was secondary. So if it was helping the class, then it was good. If it was impeding the class and getting in the way and annoying people and stressing them out, it was bad. So it ended up being the mobile part was alternative, rather than a must. And I ended up doing almost the whole course on my iPad and my iPhone because I was traveling a lot doing book stuff, and so I was just away, and it was very convenient to be able to do it on my iPhone and iPad. So it was absolutely possible, but I think I was the only one who did. The students preferred to be on their desktops, and they preferred- they didn't really want to do anything too public on the internet, like they didn't want to participate in Twitter and

things for the most part. They were happy to read along and to look at things, but I did think they didn't have the confidence yet to enter into the conversation. So that mobile part ended up being less part of the class than I thought it would. The way one of the people in our group put it was that he figures we're ahead of the curve, that eventually students will want all that stuff on their mobile devices, but they don't yet, and so we're just sort of experimenting before they get there. I'm not sure. It was a surprise to me, because students are so plugged in and want to be on their iPhones during class and everything else, but when it came to doing their school work, they want to separate it, sit down at a desktop and do it in a more traditional way.

Q. I had a conversation with another person in a case study who said you get the impression this is a generation that has grown up with computers and they know how to do all these things, and you see things about eight-year-olds making videos, but the reality of it is that not everybody is that technologically comfortable, and that they'll stick to the things they know. So they'll do Facebook, they'll do email, and they'll do some stuff on the web, but as soon as it becomes a new tool, they actually are kind of scared or averse to it. Is that something that you encountered, where there's just resistance to anything new?

A. Yeah. Yes, exactly. And I think it's not just resistance to something new. I think people are so overloaded. We need to know so many different programs and so many different ways of accessing information and so many different ways of communicating that people just aren't- they don't want one more, right? So I figured the more I could do it on platforms they were familiar with, the better it went. And then there's such a wide range, too. My class wasn't all 18 to 21-year-olds. You know, there was maybe some 19, 20-year-olds, maybe some seniors. I'm not sure, because it was online, so some people were very comfortable with computer, some people who weren't even comfortable doing an online course, let alone a mobile technology course. So that's another challenge, is balancing all the different needs and skills, because it's not a class where I have to teach them how to do all the computer stuff. We do have online help, so they can call in to get help from people at our college, but what I need to be teaching them is that creative writing, the content of the course, not how to access the course. That can't be a full-time- so they need to have certain computer skills before they come in, which is true of any online course, I think.

And I think the students were happy in the end. My students were happy. I'm sure they were, actually, because I got course evaluations and they were very good. But I was really doing a juggling act, right, trying to keep people on all different ends of the spectrum of what they expected technologically, and how much they were willing to do on mobile devices. And I was reminding myself that the most important thing was content, not mode of delivery. So I didn't penalize people because they weren't willing to engage in the mobile part.

Q. Was there anything that required the students themselves to be mobile or out in their environment or out into the community?

A. There was, but there were lots of different options for assignments, so there were ones where students could go out in nature and write something, interview people and write something. There were always many options. There was also an option where they could sit at home at their desk and do the writing that way. And people did- it was a smallish class. There were people who did a fair amount of nature writing. There were people who did travel writing about certain places and were obviously doing parts of it out away from their desk.

Q. I guess that's important as well. If someone really doesn't have a mobile device, you have to have that sort of fallback alternative so they're not limited.

A. Yeah, I know. That's another challenge, too, is that we're not supposed to say iPhone or iPad, right? It's mobile device, because you can't pick a certain brand. But the reality is that some devices don't work as well, so I can say, yeah, you can do it on whatever sort of device, but if someone has a Blackberry, it's not going to work. So that is one challenge, too, is inconsistency between devices.

Q. Another case study defined "mobile device" so broadly to include pen and paper. You can walk with it, so it's a mobile device.

A. So in that case, my course is very mobile.

Q. You don't even need a textbook! You just write it.

A. There's nothing more mobile than creative writing, then.

Q. Was there anything that surprised you about how people did use the technology when they used it?

A. I think one thing that surprised me was I think it affected my teaching. I know it affected my teaching. I was away at these writing things all the time, and meeting other writers, and being at conferences, and I had just a lot more instant access to sharing that with my students, so because it was on my mobile device and I was doing that particular course almost all on an iPhone and iPad, if something came up that I thought "this would be interesting to my students" or "this is relevant", I could immediately tell them, and they were engaged, and they appreciated it, and they- you know, sometimes students don't really care at all that I'm a writer, that I'm out engaging in these communities, but this particular class was quite interested because I think because it was so fresh and energetic, I was able to get information to them right away. And I hadn't thought of that as a benefit.

Q. That's really cool. As far as setting up the project, how did you get buy-in from faculty or other participants?

A. They were very keen. The College of the Rockies has been very supportive about doing experimental education and experimental online education, and we have a person in the department who's very involved with BCcampus, so I don't have to work to get buy-in. They're encouraging me to do things like this. I think partly because I have a bit of a national reputation as a writer, so the more that I'm online, perhaps, I can reach people interested in writing beyond our small community of Cranbrook. Of course, they're available more widely. That's one appeal.

Q. What advice would you have for others who are considering a similar initiative in their classes?

A. I think it's important to be flexible. I think the class could have been a disaster if I had in my mind "this is the way it's going to be, it's going to be a mobile technology, we're going to use Twitter, we're going to do this, and everything- we're going to have these conversations publicly on a public thing like Twitter," and then the students didn't want to do that. If I was unwilling to switch, it could have been a very bad class, but like I said, I kept in my mind that content was the most important thing, and how I delivered it was secondary, and I have to respond to the

students' needs. And so I made some pretty big changes on my plan right at the beginning of the course, and I think that's so important. It's just too early a stage with this stuff to be tied and inflexible. We're still learning so much, so if I wasn't willing to make those changes at the beginning, the course could have gone wrong fast. Students could have been stressed out and unhappy, and then you know how it is, it's bad energy right off the start. So I made changes to what I thought would work better with this particular group of students, and it worked well, but flexibility is very key. Flexibility and being able to read the students' comfort level with technology, and being able to separate between the content and mode of delivery and deciding what's important. Important in terms of reaching the course objectives.

Q. What would you like to be able to do in the future? Do you have any plans for how you would modify it for the next round?

A. Yeah. I (inaudible) saved about three different versions of the same content, ways to deliver it more mobile, ways to deliver it kind of half mobile where the mobile part's optional, ways to deliver it more traditionally, and as I was modifying the course as I went along, I saved different options. So I would like to try it again, but having that option of being able to read the course and do it. So I would like eventually to have a class that's more willing to experiment with the mobile part, and try that version of the course. But again, that really just depends on participants. And I don't want to ruin- you know, I'm primarily a creative writing teacher. I don't want to sour someone on creative writing and on taking courses online because I'm so committed to doing this experimental mode of delivery. But if I did have a course of students who were more mobile-savvy, I would like to try that, and I have that option saved, for sure.